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Turning Graduate School Aspirations into Enrollment: How Student Affairs Professionals Can Help African American Students

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Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative study was to highlight the relationship between student affairs professionals and African American students who are considering pursuing doctoral degree programs. The data were interpreted through Sanford's (1966) conceptualization of challenge and support. Findings reveal that African American students form meaningful relationships with student affairs professionals that both challenge and support their pursuit of the doctorate. Implications for research and practice are discussed.

The decision to enroll in a doctoral degree program is a complex decision that has not been thoroughly examined in the literature. Scholars have examined socialization processes (Antony, 2002; Austin, 2002; Ellis, 2001), attrition and completion rates (Bowen & Rudenstine, 1992; Golde, 2005; Lovitts, 2001) and concerns involving the dissertation (Boote & Beile, 2005; Nettles & Millet, 2006). Scholars have rarely focused on the mechanisms that inspire students to pursue the degree. In order for colleges and universities to successfully recruit and retain diverse students in graduate degree programs it is imperative that we increase our knowledge of the factors that inspire

graduate degree aspirations and facilitate enrollment, particularly among African American students.

A diverse student body allows for an exchange of ideas and perspectives that are not readily present in homogeneous environments (Gurin, Dey, Hurtado & Gurin, 2002). The cultural knowledge that diverse students bring to the classroom, and eventually their work environments, impacts academic work, research, and our ability to prepare graduate students to be competitive in an increasingly diverse global market. Currently a lack of diversity exists in graduate degree programs (Pooch, 2007). The extent of the problem is often illuminated when exploring graduate degree enrollment and degree attainment of African American students.

Over the last two decades large disparities in doctoral degree enrollment and degree attainment have been observed when comparing African Americans to other cultural groups (Council of Graduate Schools, 2004; Lehner, 1980; Pooch, 2007). Lehner (1980) noted that African Americans comprised less than 5% of the nation's PhD degrees conferred. Almost 30 years later not much has changed. African Americans comprised over 12% of the United States population in 2007 but held less than 6% of the nation's conferred doctorates (Council of Graduate Schools, 2008). According to the Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation, "it is simply unclear what works best, or what does not work, in recruiting and retaining doctoral students of color" (Cross, 2005, p. 3).

In an effort to increase enrollment McCallum (2015) suggested focusing on the factors that motivate African Americans to enroll in doctoral degree programs rather than the barriers that prevent them from pursuing the degree. The availability of funding packages (Nevill & Chen, 2007; Millett, 2003), one's desire to give back to the African American community (Louque, 1999; Schwartz, Bower, Rice, & Washington, 2003; Williams, Brewley, Reed, White, & Davis-Haley, 2005), and career advancement opportunities (Anderson & Swazey, 1998; Stoecker, 1991) have all been cited as influencing factors. Scholars have also noted that students who have meaningful interactions with faculty, peers, and support personnel are more likely to pursue a graduate degree than students who have not (King & Chepyator-Thomson, 1996; Perna, 2001).

Meaningful interactions that inspire students to pursue graduate degree programs typically occur outside the classroom (Astin, 1993; Kuh, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). For example, a study of a summer undergraduate research program students described relationships they formed with faculty as personal. They reported that working with faculty outside the classroom helped clarify their career options and inspired them to pursue graduate degree programs (Adedokun et al., 2012). Students who have meaningful interactions with peers are also inspired to pursue graduate degrees. Meaningful peer interactions typically occur in student organizations or graduate degree preparatory programs (Ethington & Smart 1986; Wagner & Nettles, 1998; Wallace, 1965). Maton, Freeman, Hrabowski and Schmitt's (2000) study of the Meyerhoff Scholars program (a program designed to increase the number of African Americans in graduate school) found that meeting other African American peers interested in pursuing graduate degrees inspired African American students to pursue advanced degrees. Students in the program referred to their peers as brothers and sisters and their faculty mentors as friends. Together, these studies support previous findings that suggested students who develop personal meaningful relationships with faculty and peers outside of the classroom are inspired to pursue advanced degrees (Ethington & Smart, 1986; Harper, Byars & Jelke, 2005; Wagner & Nettles, 1998; Wallace, 1965)

While the literature showed this evidence of how meaningful interactions with faculty and peers influence students to pursue and enroll in doctoral degree programs (e.g., Ethington & Smart, 1986; Harper et al., 2005; Wagner & Nettles, 1998; Wallace, 1965), little is known about how interacting with student affairs professionals may influence students' enrollment decision. It is assumed that student affairs professionals are present and involved when discussing undergraduate research programs or various other student support programs (Kinzie & Kuh, 2004), but the intricacies of individual relationships that students form with student affairs professionals are rarely explicitly described. The few studies that have explored the nature of student-student affairs professionals' relationships have exclusively focused on student affairs administrators. For example, in a study of 43 student affairs administrators working at liberal arts colleges, Hirt, Amelink, Schneider (2004) found that the majority of their time was spent working with students. They consider their relationships with students to be personal and

describe them as challenging, supportive, and dynamic. Likewise, Hirt, Strayhorn, Amelink, and Bennett (2006) found that student affairs administrators at historically Black colleges intentionally developed interpersonal relationships with students in order to promote academic success, decrease attrition, and foster a family-like environment where students can aspire to achieve and reach their personal goals.

Together, these two studies provide insight into the kinds of relationships students can form with student affairs professionals, but the literature still remains woefully inadequate. Both studies are from the perspective of student affairs administrators; nowhere are the voices of student affairs practitioners other than administrators (e.g. academic advisors, residence hall assistants, career counselors) as well as the opinions of students being served. It is important to understand how students view these relationships, especially as it relates to making an important decision like pursuing the doctorate.

This study aimed to add to the current literature by examining relationships students form with student affairs professionals from the student's perspective. More specifically, this study explored the influence student affairs professionals have on African Americans' decision to pursue the doctorate. The research questions that guided this study: (1) How do African American students describe their relationships with student affairs professionals; and (2) in what ways do student affairs professionals contribute to African Americans students' decision to pursue enrollment in doctoral degree programs?

Guiding Framework

Sanford's (1966) notion of challenge and support served as the conceptual framework for this study. Sanford posited college students experience personal growth and development when they receive the appropriate amount of challenge and support from the college environment. The terms personal growth and development included a "full spectrum of holistic student learning and development goals that includes vocational, professional, intellectual, cognitive, social, civic, political, moral, ethical and spiritual dimensions" (Ward, Trautvetter, & Braskamp, 2005, p. 1). The college environment refers to the physical attributes of an institution as well as the social and

academic influences a student may encounter (e.g. meaningful relationships with faculty, peers, and staff) (Astin, 1993; Tinto, 1975).

The amount of challenge and support needed by any given student “varies depending on the quality of the challenge and support provided by the environment, as well as student characteristics” (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010, p. 30). Too much support with little challenge creates an environment where students become comfortable and very little development occurs. Too many challenges with little support can stifle a student’s growth. Growth is demonstrated when a student “becomes increasingly able to integrate and act on many different experiences and influences” (Evans et al., 2010, p. 6). Sanford (1966) believed students had to be physically and psychologically ready to grow; if they were not ready they would not be able to learn from their experiences.

Methods and Data

The data presented here are part of a larger study that explored the relationships and experiences that contribute to African Americans’ decision to enroll in a doctoral program. In this paper I specifically focus on students relationships with student affairs professionals.

Participants and Sites

Forty-one currently enrolled African American pre-candidacy doctoral students were interviewed utilizing a semi-structured protocol. Doctoral pre-candidates were purposefully selected as they had moved beyond aspirations and achieved enrollment in PhD programs, therefore they could reflect on the entire enrollment process. Students pursuing professional degrees (e.g., law, social work, and business) were excluded as research suggests their experiences may be different from those enrolling in PhD programs (Mullen, Goyette, & Soares, 2003).

All self-identified as African American or Black. Individuals with multiple racial identities claimed African American or Black as their primary racial classification, with White, Asian, and Native American as secondary affiliations. The majority of participants were female (62%), and (47%) were first-generation college students. Students’ fields of study varied, with psychology as the most common (39%), followed by education, science, and engineering. The majority (79%) attended a PWI for undergraduate study.

All students were U.S. citizens and attended one of two research-intensive institutions; one public and one private (as classified by the Carnegie Foundation standards). One institution is located in a large urban city on the east coast. The other resides in a large city in the Midwest. The Carnegie Foundation classifies both as comprehensive doctoral institutions that are highly residential. Both institutions were among the top institutions in the United States to award the doctorate degree to African Americans (Borden, 2009).

Data Collection

Using criterion and network sampling (Corbin & Strauss, 2008), students were solicited to participate via email or through referrals from participants. Interviews lasted 45-90 minutes and were audio recorded. I personally conducted all of the interviews, and audio-tapes were transcribed verbatim. In order to ensure accuracy, each transcribed file was compared to its audiotape and any discrepancies were corrected.

Data Analysis and Trustworthiness

Using NVIVO software, I took excerpts from the transcripts where students referred to student affairs professionals in relation to their decision to enroll in doctoral study. I then re-read the excerpts for meaningful words, phrases, or passages. Next, I used matrices and a schematic display to indicate patterns and develop thematic groups (Miles & Huberman, 1994). I then used the themes to develop codes. All transcripts were re-read and coded with the new codes. The data was then sorted, compared, and contrasted in order to identify disconfirming evidence.

Findings

A review of the data revealed that students formed personal, meaningful relationships with student affairs professionals that helped facilitate their decision to pursue the doctorate. Participants used words like “trustworthy,” “supportive,” “close” and “parental” to describe relationships they formed with student affairs professionals who worked as academic advisors, directors, program coordinators, and tutors. Many indicated that forming these relationships with student affairs professionals were easier than forming relationships with faculty because the relationship felt more equal and informal. Students often formed these relationships during their freshmen year and the relationship continued to blossom as they persisted through college. It was clear from the

interviews that students were receiving something different from relationships they formed with student affairs professionals in comparison to other relationships in their support network. For example, David explained:

Those types of relationships let you recognize that what you are doing is important, but it also helps you put things in perspective because the moment you actually decide to pursue the doctorate you feel like you are always surrounded by academics who are also impressed by the lure of the doctorate. . . . I think having those informal [relationships] can also impact doctoral persistence.

Analysis of the data also revealed specific ways students believed student affairs professionals assisted with their decision to pursue the doctorate. Those responses were categorized into four themes: (1) stop dragging your feet; (2) broaden your horizon; (3) more than just a job; (4) beyond faculty life. In alignment with Sanford's (1966) conceptualization, the themes are presented in two categories: challenges and supports.

Challenges

Stop Dragging Your Feet

Several participants indicated they received a form of tough love from student affairs professionals. Although they had pondered and maybe even articulated that they were interested in pursuing the degree, they always thought of it as a goal they would pursue after they had established their career. Upon reflection, many of the students realized they were just "dragging their feet" because they were fearful of the unknown. Thus, they were not actively preparing themselves for the application process. All of these students expressed gratitude towards a student affairs professional for advising them to "stop dragging their feet and making excuses." Makayla explained:

I thought about the PhD and I was like 5,10, 20 years from now, after I have lived my life, but I never thought that I was ready for that step until I talked to her and some of the other professionals on campus and they kind of made me believe that it was more attainable than I thought. It wasn't this far off goal that you have to do after you've completed this and did that.

Sandy agreed. Although she was interested in pursuing the degree, her plan was to take a year off, enjoy life, earn some money, and then began applying to PhD programs. She changed her mind after several conversations with student affairs professionals who

told her horror stories about other students who had the same plan but never returned to school. She laughed when she remembered how the student affairs professional was not particularly kind to her during those conversations. The student affairs professional presented the information in a “tough love kind of way” that Sandy recalled she needed in order to heed the advice. She rephrased some of their conversation,

‘If you take that break its not going to be a fun deal getting back into the swing of school, studying, late night hours working, as well as real life stuff. Now you have a mortgage and now you have a job and your boss is like be here at nine, and if your lucky you leave at 5/5:30pm. How realistically are you going to have time to apply for these programs, study for the GRE again, do all this!’ She said, ‘get it out the way now’ and that was very beneficial hearing those horror stories about people. It’s very tempting when your done [with college] to just stop.

This type of advice was referred to as tough love because it was firm and direct.

Conversations about specific programs and disciplines often had a more nurturing tone.

Broaden Your Horizon

Many of the students pursued graduate degrees in fields that were similar to their undergraduate degree. However, a couple students were challenged by student affairs professionals to think beyond their intended plan of study. For instance, Deborah admitted she came to college with one goal in mind: medical school. During her first two years of college she developed a close personal relationships with a student affairs professional that challenged her to step out of her comfort zone and explore other disciplines she could combine with her love of science as she was pondering graduate school. Deborah recalled,

He said ‘you have to take an African American studies course. . . . I want you to, when you can, to just feel that out too. I know you have to do your science thing, but get into that realm as well because it’s a great place for it.’ So he told me about graduate schools that have both.

Brian had a similar conversation with a student affairs professional. He was interested in pursuing a law degree because his father and uncles were lawyers. But after several conversations with a student affairs professional he began wondering if he really had a passion for law. Brain recounted,

He said ‘you have to pay attention to what really sparks your interest and what makes your soul leap inside, pay attention to those themes and start to bend your vocation towards that . . . you will never be fully happy doing something that someone else told you to do or that you think you should do.’

Brian referred to the wisdom he received as “listening to your inner voice.” He credits the conversation and others he shared with student affairs professionals with giving him the courage to pursue his PhD in political science.

Supports

More Than Just a Job

Students frequently described being exposed to information, resources, and experiences that educated them about what it meant to enroll in a PhD program through employment opportunities given to them by student affairs professionals. For example, Aaron worked in the Dean’s office and said “to get that kind of experience and see the inner-workings of academia and see how people do things is priceless.” Ebony worked in a summer research opportunity program and was able to form close relationships with many of the staff members. Although she was not officially in the program the student affairs professionals took the time to make sure that she had access to the same information and most of the experiences that those enrolled in the program had. Ebony credits her work experiences and the life-long relationships she was able to form with student affairs professionals for helping her make the decision to pursue the PhD

[They] told me about research and what it is like to be a professor . . . and got me connected with other people at other schools so that I could have options. So I had a choice of what school I wanted to go to because I had good relationships with everyone in the office. . . . They definitely helped me decide.

John had a similar experience. When he mentioned to his employers that his friends were preparing for graduate school they encouraged him to do so as well. His co-workers became his biggest cheerleaders and the director utilized discretionary funds to help him with expenses.

They paid for all the application fees so I didn’t have to pay application fees to any of the schools that I applied to. . . . They looked over my personal statement, CV, email correspondence; if I needed a letter of recommendation they wrote it. .

. . She helped me develop my research agenda and just helped me put it all together.

Makayla too was able to gain knowledge from working with student affairs professionals, but her knowledge did not come from the content of the program. Rather, Makayla benefitted from listening to the wisdom of student affairs professionals who had earned their PhDs and currently worked in her office.

Some of the other administration I talked to had their PhD's so everyone had already attained their degree so they were able to give me advice about what kind of programs to look for and some of the things that you should research when you are looking at different schools such as advisers, if you they have your research interest in mind and if the program is going to cater to you, funding, the research facilities on campus.

Students described student affairs professionals who had earned their PhD as role models. They provided information on how to successfully apply and enroll in graduate degree programs and they had knowledge of careers PhD recipients could pursue other than becoming a faculty member.

Beyond Faculty Life

Often pursuit of the doctorate is mistakenly connected to only pursuing a career as a faculty member. However, PhD trained student affairs professionals became role models of how one can have a successful career without becoming a faculty member. Many of the participants appreciated being able to discuss alternative employment options with student affairs professionals as they perceived faculty members were not as knowledgeable. David said,

I talked to my boss who I used to work for. . . . He has his doctorate in education and psychology so he and I got a chance to talk about it a little bit and he is an administrator now and so it was good to get a chance to talk to him about why he pursued [his job], why he decided to choose this path instead of traditional faculty track.

Bianca recalled having similar conversations. As a psychology major Bianca assumed if she pursued the PhD she would be committing to becoming faculty. An informal conversation with a student affairs professional, who had earned her PhD in

psychology, opened her eyes to alternative possibilities. Bianca paraphrased the conversation where a student affairs professional said,

You will have so much freedom; I love it. I love the thought of having a PhD. Not that you have to go [to become a faculty member], but you can go on to be a consultant for companies; you can do so much depending on your sub-field.

It was the first time anyone had ever discussed alternative employment opportunities with Bianca and several other students in the study. In summary, students were able to form meaningful relationships with student affairs professionals that helped facilitate their decision to pursue a graduate degree.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to increase understanding of the relationships students form with student affairs professionals and examine how those relationships influence students' decision to pursue a doctoral degree. The findings revealed students form close meaningful relationships with student affairs professionals that help facilitate their doctoral enrollment decision. Students described their relationships with student affairs professionals as trustworthy and supportive. They were adamant that these relationships were easier to form than relationships they had attempted to form with faculty.

Sanford's (1966) conceptualization of challenge and support was a useful framework to explore the student-student affairs professional relationship. It was clear student affairs professionals challenged students to turn their degree aspirations into enrollment. The role of challenging students is something that has previously been associated with faculty (Magolda, 2005; Kinzie & Kuh, 2004; Ward et al., 2005). Student affairs professionals have primarily been looked upon as the individuals who provide support (Magolda, 2005; Kinzie & Kuh, 2004; Ward et al., 2005), but findings from this study revealed that student affairs professionals played a key role in challenging and supporting students in their desire to pursue an advanced degree. Student affairs professionals encouraged students to apply to various programs, provided information about preparatory classes, and made available opportunities to network with others who could provide insight into what it would be like to be a PhD student. This finding aligns with previous literature that posits student affairs professionals are responsible for

serving students holistically (Hirt et al., 2008; Lowery & Mueller, 2012; Ward et al., 2005). The task, serving student holistically, can be difficult due to the student affairs/academic affairs divide on most college campuses (Magolda, 2005). However, findings from this study uniquely demonstrate how student affairs professionals can fulfill their mission of serving students holistically when working with students who desire to pursue the doctorate.

The relationships students developed with student affairs professionals often began during their freshman year and continued through graduation. The length of the relationship is important because research has shown creating a culture of challenge and support takes time (Ward et al., 2005). In this study it was evident student affairs professionals and students both invested time into making the relationship meaningful; this was necessary in order for students to be receptive to the challenges. For instance, students would not have been responsive to the tough love they received from student affairs professionals if they had not invested time into building a trustworthy relationship. Many of the students were employed by or worked with student affairs professionals making the longevity of the relationship possible even with busy schedules. The workspace was viewed as a safe place where students could gather, reflect, and learn from others as they pondered their enrollment decision.

Finally, it is important to note the student affairs professionals play an important role in students' co-curricular and curricular lives (Ward et al., 2005). A few students were encouraged to expand their curricular options and, in fact, altered their graduate degree plans. This finding highlights the need for student affairs professionals and faculty to work together. By collaborating, student affairs professionals and faculty can avoid duplicating efforts and can better determine that the advice they provide is in the best interest of the student. A review of a study called Project Deep, may help to better understand effective ways student affairs professionals and faculty can work together to best serve students (Kinzie & Kuh, 2004).

Implications for Student Affairs Practice and Scholarship

It is surprising that relationships between student affairs professionals and students have not been discussed more in the literature. Findings from this study demonstrate the importance of these relationships especially as they pertain to students

who are considering pursuing the doctorate. Scholars should continue to unpack the nuances of these relationships. It is quite possible that further developing African American students relationships with student affairs professionals may be the ingredient needed to increase African American students enrollment in doctoral degree programs.

Student affairs preparatory programs may also want to use the findings from this study to assess how they are presenting the role of student affairs professionals in their curriculum. The close interpersonal relationships students discussed in this study may require additional training in counseling and interpersonal communication techniques for student affairs professionals who want to maintain appropriate boundaries and yet support students. Students in this study referred to student affairs professionals as family and friends. Those types of relationships, especially for African American students, require a certain amount of nurturing, challenge, and support that may be covered as part of the standard curriculum.

Finally, graduate degree programs may want to use findings from this study to support their need to work with student affairs professionals to recruit and retain graduate students of color. Most of the literature referring to student affairs professionals is focused on their role with undergraduate students. However, these findings illuminate how their impact can reach beyond the bachelor's degree. A concerted effort on the part of colleges and universities is warranted to better understand how student-student affairs professional relationship may be critical to school's recruitment, retention, and overall student development strategies.

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